

Subject, subjectivity, subjectivation

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abstract This article analyses the concept of subject, and its related associated notions of subjectivity and subjectivation. In social sciences the terms subject, individual, agent, person or social actor are often used interchangeably; however, these concepts have different analytical meanings, and each of them is connected to different sociological approaches. Today research is moving towards an idea of subject and subjectivity that takes into account cultural and gender differences, historical and situated processes of subjectivation, complex relationships with techno-scientific tools, contextual capacities of resistance and creativity.

keywords difference ♦ domination ♦ social theory ♦ subject ♦ subjectivity

Introduction

In social sciences the terms subject, individual, agent, person or social actor are often used interchangeably. However, these concepts have different analytical meanings, and each of them is connected to different sociological approaches; the degree of analytical specificity of each of these terms is often therefore related more to the perspective of the single author, than to the output of a given sociological tradition.

A good example is the reference to the concept of *individual*, which seems to be the more theoretically transversal and the more widespread in the sociological literature. Indeed, in recent decades the idea of individual has been at the centre of debates characterized by various theoretical approaches, first and foremost, those around individualism, individualization and methodological individualism. On the one hand, following the Durkheimian tradition, the idea of individual is related to that of singularity: the individual is a unit in a systemic, historical and collective process of singularization and specialization breaking away from previous holistic social relations (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Dumont, 1983). On the other hand, following the Weberian tradition, the idea of individual is related to the understanding of social action and to the intentionality of action: here the

individual is conceived as the reference unit of a micro-sociological approach (Boudon, 2003; Elster, 1979). In the first case, there is always tension between individual and collectivity, free will and social organization; while in the second case, the individual is the centre of sociological understanding, and intersubjectivity is the basis of social networking. Since Weber and Simmel, a considerable part of sociology has been persuaded that it is possible to study society through the single subjects involved in the process of individualization, and since Durkheim it has been clear that the differentiation of functions, as well as of personal pathways, was a systemic and irreversible process.

Although, in some cases, attention towards the individual dimension has been mainly a consequence of the crisis of the concept of society, or society as nation-state, in other sociological traditions the individual and the evaluation of his/her rational choice has been, since the beginning, the main topic of analysis of meaningful action (Coleman, 1990). Yet, the focus on the individual, elaborated for instance by methodological individualism, has been considered as a model of the rational actor – and criticized as too instrumental and insensitive to power relations –

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while the idea of individual that follows the Durkheimian tradition of the individualization processes has been regarded as a way of finding fault with the weakness of both social bonds and of relationships of recognition and solidarity in modern and postmodern societies (Bauman, 2001; Beck et al., 1994; Giddens, 1991). Hence, the debate around the concept of individual, which has been particularly lively in France in the last 20 years (Dubet, 2005; Lahire, 2004; Martuccelli, 2010; Wieviorka, 2012), appears to be transversal to diverse sociological traditions.

This article analyses – necessarily in a selective way – only the concept of subject, and its related associated notions of subjectivity and subjectivation, which are fundamental to the relationships and the interconnectedness of sociology, social theory and philosophical reflection (Taylor, 1992). The article explores how the concept of subject stretches to very different interpretations. It can be extended from an ontological idea of mind and rationality – or, on the contrary, from an idea of the body and its passions – to a purely textual, discursive or semiotic position; it can be conceived as the result of subjectivation and interiorization of domination, or that of an emancipating action based on free will; it can be conceptualized as *self-referential* or as *relational*, when the subject is the result of the relationships he/she has with other subjects and with the immediate environment.

More recently, there has been an attempt to overcome both ontological and textual positions by relational and reticular conceptualizations of subjectivity. The idea is to look beyond the notion of subject as a metaphysical foundation, or as a spectral presence in the texts, and beyond the idea of subjectivation as the process of becoming a subject in an endless power/knowledge relation. Indeed, all the traditional formulations and criticisms of the idea of subject have been called into question, and we are now in a moment of redefinition of this fundamental theoretical reference for social sciences: who is the subject? And how, today, can we speak about the subject? This article attempts to briefly describe the contemporary debate.

Theoretical framework

Debates around the concepts of subject, subjectivity and subjectivation are more widespread in continental sociology, especially French and German, which is more sensitive to the discussions around the dialectics of freedom and domination; while they are almost absent – or present mainly in the postmodern and poststructuralist critical wave – in the British

and American tradition, which is more focused on empiricist, rationalist and pragmatist approaches with a prevalent anti-ontological sensibility. For example, the explorations of the *Self* of George H Mead (1934) or Erving Goffman (1959) are never ontological or normative, and always focused on the contingent setting of intersubjective action, on behaviour, performance and role playing, not on the nature of the Self.

The notion of subjectivity adopted by sociologists is mainly – often implicitly – related to the concept of subject, elaborated within the existentialist philosophical tradition. As a matter of fact, the existentialist tradition inaugurated by Heidegger – previously designed by Kierkegaard – was the first philosophical system fully dedicated to the uncertainty of individuals faced with the contingency of the world, the unexpected social change, the necessity to give meaning to actions. This philosophical tradition had an influence too on the sociological debate concerning the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, the centrality of the agent and hegemony of social structures (Giddens, 1982). According to the basic existentialist reference, the subject is someone who has been thrown into a world of languages and rules ‘already there’, and finds him/herself entrapped in its phenomenological contingency and social structuration. In sociological terms this idea of the subject has been essential to the conceptualization of the theme of domination, both in social practices and social representations, so that the controversial mark left by existentialism on the conceptualization of subjectivity in the social sciences has been fundamental to the design of the permanent tension between emancipation and constraints (Touraine, 1992).

In sociological theory, the reference to the interpretation of the subject inaugurated by Heidegger has been important in broadening the analysis of domination beyond the dialectical approach inherited from Hegel and Marx, even though the legacy of Heidegger has always been controversial. It has been vigorously opposed not only by the Frankfurt School (Adorno, 1973), but also by Pierre Bourdieu, who, at the centre of his sociological analysis, has attempted to put an end to the dichotomy between subjectivation and objectivation.

Hence, it is not surprising that Bourdieu felt the need to investigate Heidegger’s effect on French intellectuals (Bourdieu, 1991). Besides his criticism of the political opportunism of the German philosopher during the Nazi regime, Bourdieu’s aim has been mainly to analyse the limits of the existentialist idea of agency, by reinforcing his own idea of embodied dispositions. Bourdieu is critical especially of the existentialist philosophical hegemony in the

France of the 1950s, and its consequences on the development of sociological thought. In line with the Durkheimian endeavour to make sociology an independent discipline, Bourdieu criticizes the mix of existentialism and Marxism promoted by Sartre, and he is fully convinced of the superiority of social sciences over philosophy in critically contextualizing ideas, values and behaviours (Bourdieu, 1990).

The opposing theoretical path was taken by Alain Touraine (1984, 1992, 2013), who was inspired by Sartre's attempt to set up a sort of 'existentialist sociology', for which the desires for both freedom and justice are based on the ability 'to look beyond the situation' and are constitutional to the idea of the subject. Placing himself outside the poststructuralist and postmodern debate, Touraine has interpreted the idea of the subject as the foundation of resistance to socialization, giving to this concept a specific anti-social meaning. Though caught in the contingency, in the constraints and trials of the situation, the subject always has the opportunity to deal with them using his/her faculty of imagination and creativity.

The sociological debate around the idea of subject is also related to the influential work of Michel Foucault, his critical interpretation of the existentialist wave in France, his elaboration of the structuralist approach, and his reflection on the production of the subject by the processes of subjectivation (Foucault, 2005). Foucault recognizes that in the existentialist tradition developed in the 20th century, the subject – who is, at the same time, part of and reflexively detached from the world 'already there' – is for the first time the real focus of the analysis not only in philosophy but also in social theory. The subject is no longer an ontological being related to sensations or to pure cognitive reason; instead, he/she is always 'in a situation', a part of the world and of the conditions of this world, so that the relationship of the subject to the situation is always open and unpredictable. Foucault also claims that this radical contingency becomes the only situational moment in which the subject can develop marginal emancipation from the inevitability of the processes of subjectivation. The subject is someone who exists in the material world with his/her phenomenological and embodied side: the subject is not transcendental, universal or meta-cultural.

This has become a matter of fact for social sciences, for which it is not possible to refer to a subject separately from the historical and cultural contingency or outside the concreteness of singular biographies and collective experiences. Hence, there is a kind of historical, institutional and situated injunction to become subjects: society and organizations need autonomous responsible individuals, capable of 'giving an account of themselves' when faced with

institutions (Butler, 2005; Melucci, 1996).

The French debate has certainly been the centre of European reflections on the subject in the last half-century, however on this theme the position elaborated by Jürgen Habermas has been just as influential and related to a further interpretation. First of all Habermas was engaged in a long-distance debate with Michel Foucault on the issues of modernity, Enlightenment and subjectivity (Habermas, 1986). Habermas criticizes the 'neo-Nietzschean turn' within postmodernism and poststructuralism and its destructive line as he still believes in reasonable subjectivity. He claims that reason, criticized both by the Frankfurt School and by poststructuralism, has been reduced to instrumentality because of a long-standing tradition of subject-centred reason and philosophy of consciousness. Nevertheless, according to Habermas, the reference to subjectivity cannot be metaphysical, as it continues to be, he argues, in the work of Foucault. In his discussion, Habermas sheds light on some contradictions in Foucault's approach, arguing that, in spite of his formal anti-subjectivist position, his analysis of domination and hermeneutics of the self continues to be based on an ontological idea of the subject (Habermas, 1987).

Conversely, Habermas claims that the linguistic turn and a focus on intersubjectivity and social relations are the only instruments to put an end to the legacy of a metaphysical and self-referential conceptualization of the subject. Hence, the paradigm of communicative action becomes a way of saving the analytical reference to the subject and above all to his/her reason, his/her capability to construct democratic relationships, to engage collectively in the public space. According to Habermas anti-humanist and anti-subjectivist attitudes are incompatible with a critique of power and with the possibility of a dialogical ethic. The subject lives in the language but does not disappear into it; it is the fluidity of communication and the intersubjective need of the other that avoids a metaphysical vision of the subject.

At this stage, we can see that, in spite of the critiques, the adjustments and the retrenchments, the notions of subject, subjectivity and subjectivation are still crucial when speaking about emancipation and rights, difference and recognition, body and practices, and other fundamental sociological issues. Starting from diverse theoretical perspectives, social sciences are seeking a fresh, innovative and non-metaphysical conceptualization of subjectivity that could simultaneously take into account the recognition of difference in a pluralist world, an idea of foundation without essentialism, the opportunity of a justification of rights centred on the autonomy of the subjects from which these rights derive.

In contemporary social sciences however, the matter of the subject still has an ambivalent status, so that if some authors have practically abandoned it completely, others have decided to make it the centre of their reflections. Among the latter we find mainly those scholars interested in the theme of power and domination, in the processes of subjectivation and more generally in the political consequences of the conceptualization of subjectivity. Still, in contemporary social sciences the framework around which the issue of subject and subjectivity is discussed presents a variety of interconnected themes: one more explicitly related to the political idea of subject as citizen; another focused on the embodied subject arising from feminism; yet another centred on the anti-ontological and anti-Eurocentric idea of the subject, based on the question of difference and inspired by poststructuralism, postcolonialism, cultural studies and critical studies on racism; finally a further theme focused on the anti-anthropocentric idea of subject related to techno-scientific studies as well as to biopolitical interpretations. All these topics stemmed from the critique of the metaphysical subject of modernity: the enlightened, existentialist, European and bourgeois subject; all these areas of study are searching for an innovative way to conceptualize the subject in contemporary societies, for an answer to the question: who comes after the (modern) subject? (Cadava et al., 1991).

The political subject

The concepts of subject and subjectivity have been important in social science debates since the turning point of 1968, when they ceased to be an object of abstract philosophical reflection and became a matter of political and sociological theory. This politicization of the subject concerns not only its demolition as ontological representation of the white, male, bourgeois and European emancipated subject, but it also concerns the renewal of the reflection on the status of the subject as citizen entitled to rights. These two tendencies have led to an ambivalence: how to conceptualize the subject of an action bound by rights without reproducing an ontological and monocultural vision of his/her status? In the last few decades French social and political theory has been the more active in reflecting on the first part of this ambivalence – the subject as citizen and bound by rights – while cultural theory and postcolonial studies have been more sensitive to the questions raised by the conceptualization of a pluralist idea of subjectivity.

As mentioned previously, it is in France that the idea of the subject has been more explicitly dismantled and scrutinized by poststructuralism, decon-

structionism and postmodernism – by the trio of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard respectively – as well as by the structural Marxism of Louis Althusser and the fragmented, nomadic subject of Gilles Deleuze. This important reflection took place around the turmoil of May 1968 and in correspondence with later social movements. In all of these authors the critique of the ontology of the subject is first of all a critique of the self-sufficiency of the Kantian enlightened, rational subject and of the pursuit of the ‘authentic’ subject by Sartre; indeed, the political interpretation of such anti-subjectivist positions was a critique of more specific individuals – usually in a socially stronger position – who have assigned to themselves the abstract qualities of the subject.

While the critique of the subject developed from the hermeneutic perspective and linguistic turn was more focused on the intersubjectivity of communication – the subject is not totally autonomous and self-transparent since it is always engaged in intersubjective relationships – the poststructuralist attack against the subject and his/her rationality was directed towards the themes of autonomy and authenticity: the subject is not self-transparent and is always entrapped in some form of domination and conditioning. This explains why, for Habermas or for Giddens, rules and the socialization to rules are not necessarily solely a form of domination, but are also enabling instruments of action, while for Foucault they are, quite the reverse, always instruments of *dressage* and subjectivation.

More recently, the legacy of these reflections has been developed by other French authors, who, starting from different theoretical standpoints, have attempted to find a new configuration of the relationship between the conceptualization of the subject and that of human and social rights. Indeed, the issue of rights is fundamental not only as a moral and normative problem but also in the conceptualization of the subject in contemporary social sciences. Again, the problem is to look beyond a metaphysical and universalistic idea of subject and natural rights, without accepting a pure relativist idea of rights and a total dismantling of the reference to the subject of those rights. Here we find authors with Sartrian ascendancy such as Touraine (2013), as well as authors with an Althusserian background such as Etienne Balibar (2011), Alain Badiou (1982) and Jacques Rancière (1995). According to Balibar subjectivity, equality, universality and citizenship must be analysed together. As universality is too complex a concept to be considered homogeneous, so subjectivity should not be conceptualized as a unit, but as *transindividual*, impossible to evaluate without collective and intersubjective recognition. Following

Arendt, Balibar claims that it is possible to think of equality, democracy and rights beyond the nation-state, beyond a single culture and a monocultural idea of the subject (Balibar, 2011). Also, according to Touraine (2013) a human being can be defined as a subject only in an open and democratic context, where social and human rights are guaranteed, a context able to think of diversity and equality together. The subject is no longer referred to as a single culture or as a historicist process, and he/she is no longer a collective actor – such as the working-class movement – but a single and fragile individual, who can feel his/her *subjectiveness* as a form of resistance against socialization and injustice.

The embodied subject

After 1968 and the succeeding movements, the subject starts to be conceived as a single-plural, no longer monolithically conceptualized in the rational mind of the white European male, but always engaged in relational processes with other subjects and with the immediate natural and technical environment. Feminism had a fundamental role in this change, first and foremost for having shed light on an embodied idea of subjectivity. Women's movements and feminist critical thinking have tried to go beyond both the classical sociological insight of rational action, and the interpretation of the public sphere as fundamental aspects of modernity, to explore the embodied, 'private' and emotional dimensions of subjectivity (on this see also the entry on 'Contemporary sociology and the body' by Miriam Adelman and Lennita Ruggi in Sociopedia.isa). An enquiry into the embodied subject has been developed also by cultural and post-colonial studies investigating the issues of colour and the racialized body, as well as by sociologies developed in non-western countries (Connel, 2007).

Feminism has been the more important turning point for putting an end to enduring dichotomies such as body/mind, nature/culture and more generally of the Cartesian and later Kantian ideas of consciousness. The subject is gendered, sometimes racialized, culturally defined, which means that subjectivity cannot be identified with the myth of the European, rational, white male. This myth is based on the priorities of sexuality and of colour in defining subjectivity, so that a new conceptualization of the subject cannot but pass through a discussion of sexualized and embodied subjects. This explains the profound influence of Foucault on this debate, but also the need to look beyond his legacy – again focused mainly on sexuality – to expand the fields of research (Irigaray, 1993). In recent decades a great deal of literature has accumulated on these topics, ranging from the cultural construction of the gen-

dered body, to queer theory (Butler, 2004), from the intersection between the raced, gendered and socially positioned embodied subject (Lutz et al., 2011) to the naturalized body of coloured women deprived of their subjectivity (hooks, 2000). Other more recent studies have attempted to highlight the complexity of the embodied structure of the subject, where the body refers to a layer of corporeal materiality that cannot be confused with issues of political subjectivity (Braidotti, 2013). In this vein, in the last decade there has also been an emergent *affective turn* in social sciences – mainly inspired by Gilles Deleuze – that might be seen as a continuation of interest in the body looking for further conceptualization of the subject, more focused on vitality and emotions (Braidotti, 2013).

Certainly, gender studies have been divided into different theoretical perspectives, especially opposing liberal and deliberative approaches, more focused on issues of equality and rights (MacKinnon, 2006; Nussbaum, 1998), and other avenues of study, influenced more by poststructuralism, psychoanalysis or deconstructivism, interested in redefining domination and power relations, in addition to the contingency of emancipation (De Lauretis, 1999). Faced with the incommensurability of these positions, a third way has been presented by other authors such as Seyla Benhabib (1996) and Nancy Fraser (2009), who consider the radical deconstruction of the subject unfit for a critique of gendered power relations, just as a pure normative and juridical discussion is inappropriate. Hence, an idea of gendered subjectivity is considered a necessary basis for the claim of rights in the public sphere and for not giving excessive weight to plural and rhizomatic identities over the claim of equality and redistribution. The question is how to resituate subjectivity in a network of interrelated variables set alongside different axes of subjectivation such as race, culture, nationality, class, life-choices and sexual orientation. The *intersectionality* of these axes is a relevantly new theoretical frontier of social stratification studies (Anthias, 2013; McDowell, 2012), besides being a way of putting an end to the previously fragmented method of studying gender, racial or class identities.

The subject of difference

The theme of cultural difference, of the construction of subjectivity beyond the influence of western culture, the question of colour line and racialization, have also been fundamental in shaping the debate on the subject in recent decades. A generation of intellectuals born or working outside the western world has developed reflections and empirical studies showing that western conceptualization of the subject can no longer consider itself the unique or

authentic model. Starting with the pioneer studies of Said (1979), then Spivak (1988), Bhabha (1994), Dussel (1995), Chakrabarty (2000), Mbembe (2013) and many others, intellectuals coming from the previously colonized world have revealed the historicity and the cultural relativism of the western model of subjectivity as well as its associations with the colonial past. Prior to postcolonial and de-colonial studies, the works of Frantz Fanon and those of the African-American WEB Du Bois had already raised the question of the 'authentic' subjectivity of the non-white individual and the impossibility of the 'coloured' subject to be really free and emancipated.

This focus on the embodied and political 'difference' of *subalterns* has been used as a critical standpoint against the ontology of the western, white subject, and it has been enhanced, again, by the influence of poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, deconstructivism, as well as by the heterodox Marxism of Gramsci (Young, 2001). The aim has been not only that of criticizing the abstract subject but also that of investigating the pluralism of subjectivities of all subalterns, such as colonized and racialized people. However, in spite of the heterogeneity of these theoretical sources and the determination to define the subject in a new way, a certain attitude of 'negative dialectics' is a common characteristic of these studies as in Adorno's perspective: the accent is put on what is lacking, on what is not, on what was against the law or mainstream signifiers, even though the task is to find an autonomous and non-Eurocentric way to describe and express subjectivity. This attitude of negative dialectics has been contested especially by Latin American de-colonial studies (Dussel, 1995; Mignolo, 2002; Quijano, 2000) which have insisted on the necessity of decolonizing knowledge, avoiding a passive assimilation of western analytical tools, and finding an interpretation of subjectivity and emancipation in the hybrid culture of subaltern strata of non-western countries, such as those of indigenous people.

A partially alternative path towards this goal has been taken by authors who have faced the topic of postcolonial and post-racialized subjectivities from the reconstruction of the historical background. Scholars like Chatterjee (2011) and Bhabra (2007) have tried to show how a reconsideration of historical events of colonization can be reconciled with the original cultural hybridity of the very western idea of subjectivity. The western cultural legacy has been constantly contaminated and 'translated' by other cultural influences and by the combination of these elements in empirical and contingent historical situations. Hence, we cannot say that there is a truly western and non-western idea of the subject, because even the Kantian or the Hegelian ideas of subjectiv-

ity are related to the historical events of their time such as colonization (Buck-Morss, 2000).

The *culturelessness* aspect of the western idea of subjectivity has also been criticized by cultural studies, by their empirical research on migrations and popular culture and their relations with racialization and discrimination processes (Gilroy, 2004; Hall, 1997). Also from a more explicitly political stance – such as that of the *New Left Review* edited by Stuart Hall – the aim was to carry out a re-examination of the resistant subjectivities – not necessarily those of the white working class – against the hegemony of cultural and economic elites. Here the focus was less on an ontological idea of the subject to be dismantled, than on the construction of subjectivities by means of emancipation. Everyday experience, cultural consumption, rituals, subcultures, social movements are the fields where 'alternative' and hybrid subjectivities are performed.

The anti-anthropocentric subject

Another wave of contemporary studies around the subject is represented by the attempt to overcome an anthropocentric view of subjectivity. The legacy of structuralism, poststructuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, deconstructivism – where the subject was conceived mainly as a textual position or an interpellation – paved the way for the idea of a non-substantialist subject in social sciences. In this vein, we can find at least two main perspectives: one is the development of Foucauldian biopolitics and governmentality approaches, which are indeed still close to an anthropocentric vision; the other is a more explicitly anti-anthropocentric view, where the subject is dispersed in the cognitive and material tools and networks of techno-science, as well as in a broader idea of life and nature. On the one hand, the focus is on the control of life and the embodied subject by power relations, and on the other hand, the aim is to shed light on the progressive undermining of the ancient body/mind dichotomy in an environment dominated by techno-science.

In the case of biopolitics, as politics of life itself, there is a criticism of the juridical and normative conceptualization of the subject as an abstract vision of a person who has rights. Rights are rooted in positive law, in power relations of the state and institutions, so that the law or citizenship rights cannot be the real basis for emancipation (Foucault, 2004). On the contrary, the subject is connected to some sort of vital substance but held in a world of controls, conditioning and constraints. From the biopolitical perspective, immanent life is domesticated by institutions, cognitive-capitalism, warfare, so that it can be subjected to power relations that transform it into 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998).

The approach of biopolitics remains concerned with a horizon of future human freedom, sometimes with a nostalgic and melancholic interpretation of the current destiny of subjects as human beings whose lives can be annihilated. Hence, while criticized or reassessed, the theme of the subject is not abandoned, it remains the basis for resistance and emancipation, although the subject is no longer a monad in a privileged position, it is a life restrained by the infinite mechanisms of power. Here the anti-anthropocentric vision concerns mainly the focus on 'life' instead of a focus on 'man'. The aim is to discover an abstract site – vital life instead of the rational mind – where the subject cannot be captured and can start to organize resistance against domination.

An alternative interpretation of biopolitics – neither melancholic nor thanatological – is present among the authors who have developed the vitalist side of biopolitics, inspired mainly by Spinoza's anti-anthropocentric legacy and its interpretation by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Here, the generative force of life, Spinoza's conatus, the force of affects, become the basis for an ethics of biopolitics (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). The work of Deleuze and Guattari has been influential also for the post-human side of this debate around the subject: the reticular, relational, molecular and anti-singular conceptualization of subjectivity as 'becoming' has inspired an interpretation quite a distance from that of governmentality. The subject becomes decentred, ex-centred, an assemblage, the comingling of diverse materials, where the subject/object modern dichotomy completely disappears. The subject is no longer consciousness or unconsciousness, but a plural, relational entity, founded on positive creativity: the subject is a *machine désirante*.

In other less libertarian versions the anti-anthropocentric subject becomes merely an *actant* made up of temporary networks and immanent experiences (Whitehead and Wesch, 2012; Wolfe, 2010). This view goes beyond the search for the contingency of freedom or Foucault's practices of taking care of the Self; instead, pure empiricism and temporary assemblage become a new metaphysics without subject, as Bruno Latour says in his actor-network theory (Latour, 2005). Practices no longer originate in a subject as an anthropological and ontological figure, practices and connections instead become the new ontological data. If the post-human view is an anti-subjectivist approach, radically relational, diffident to abstract ethics and the myth of the Greek *polis*, it can also make a claim for a new cosmological and environmentalist view to face technological changes (Stengers, 2010). These reticular, pragmatic and process-oriented approaches try to offer an epistemic

way out from the search of the lost foundations of the subject.

Empirical work

That of the subject is not directly an empirical issue of sociology, it has instead a fundamental theoretical stake. However, empirical investigations exist and can be found practically in all of the approaches we have analysed above. Usually the issue of subjectivity is not the direct and explicit theme of the investigation, but it can be retraced in the theoretical frame of the investigation itself. Empirical research on the subject as citizen concerns mainly social research on social movements; feminism has been central to the promotion of research on the embodied subject, on sexuality and gendered subjectivities; the issue of plural and non-Eurocentric conceptualizations of the subject has been investigated mainly by research on cultural difference, racism and discrimination, as well as by postcolonial studies; research into the social consequences of post-anthropocentrism and techno-scientific evolutions has finally provided a theoretical base for environmentalism and the green social movements. Since even a succinct overview of all of these fields of studies would be impossible, we can only remind ourselves of the directions that some of this research is taking.

Concerning the issue of the political subject as citizen and entitled to rights, the theoretical reflections continue to be confined mainly to political theory, even though there are frequent contacts and exchanges with studies of social movements. In recent decades research on social movements, such as alter-global movements for social justice or Occupy, has been greatly concerned with collective action as the practice of emancipation and subjective resistance (Castells, 2012; De Sousa Santos, 2006; Farro and Lustiger-Thaler, 2014). In addition, even though other research on social movements is not specifically focused on an investigation of subjectivity, it constantly refers to the subject as a person acting rationally or emotionally to organize practices of resistance (Goodwin et al., 2001).

In the wide range of approaches and themes in social movement studies, the issue of subjectivity has been investigated mainly in research focused on the struggles for rights and social justice as global and plural goals, but also in historical research on mobilization against colonial power and racist discrimination, as well as in research on environmentalism and sustainable consumption. In spite of diverse theoretical frames of reference, there are common points between the active political subject of social

movement studies and those of cultural and post-colonial studies (Chakrabarty, 2000; Chatterjee, 2011; Mignolo, 2002). The broad constellation of postcolonial studies is particularly involved in the historical investigation into the subjectivity of those who tried to resist colonial rule and to the investigation of the different cultural bases of the construction of subjectivity (Nandy, 1983). In the case of environmentalism, besides the analysis of the green social movements and of 'deep ecology' claims, subjectivity has been investigated mainly in its western philosophical and religious anthropocentric legacy – often related to androcentrism and ethnocentrism – unable to take into account the interconnections and fragile balance of human beings and the ecological systems.

Theoretical feminist reflection – at times explicitly connected to postcolonial and environmentalist criticism – has also been particularly inspiring for a vast field of research on subjectivation that has intercepted both the research on biopolitics and that on post-anthropocentrism. In this field the work of Braidotti (2013) is a valid example of this comingling. Starting from a feminist standpoint, Braidotti focuses on an idea of the subject able to deal with the vital capacities of her/his body, without considering the body as transhistorical data. While subjectivity has always had a contingent and a historical meaning, as well as a situated expression in local practices, it cannot be reduced to a simple product of power or of its own positionality. Rather, subjectivity is always unfinished, related to immanent experiences, intersubjective relations and affects but also to the materiality of the body. The nomadic subject of our globalized world cannot be conceived as unitarian and monolithic; instead, we should study the subject's capacities for multiple and non-linear connections with other subjects (not only human), technological objects, with opportunities to resist contemporary cognitive-capitalism and opportunities to innovate.

Finally, empirical research on the transformation of the subject has been important also in social psychology, particularly in relational, discursive and critical psychology, deeply influenced by the debates concerning poststructuralism, feminist critical theory and postcolonial questioning of modernity (Collison, 1992; Henriques et al., 1984; Holloway, 1989). This literature is mainly focused on methods of investigating subjectivity from an embodied, relational and historical point of view, with specific attention towards contextualized relational subjectivities, in some cases held in gendered, racialized and positioned dynamics, in other cases able to deal creatively with such constraints.

Assessment and future agenda

The dismantling of the subject organized by the *maîtres du soupçon* Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, by Heidegger's *Dasein*, then by poststructuralism, post-modernism and deconstructivism seems to have come to a close. The idea of the subject has been deeply criticized, but never abandoned, at least as a conceptual and textual reference, and today theoretical reflection is attempting to redefine it as a crucial element of social and political theory. Indeed, an idea of the subject is required in order to understand the resistance and the dialectics regarding what creates or surrounds the subject, hence it is necessary to social sciences as a critical and not merely a descriptive discipline.

The concept of subject as social actor has been dismantled by the criticism of what he/she is not: not independent, autonomous or emancipated, not really rational and captured by the products of rationality, too civilized and socialized to express authenticity and profound affects, too confined by *habitus*, routines and common sense. And yet, for Foucault himself the power/knowledge relationships create the subject but never in a complete or definitive way, so that margins of resistance are always possible (Foucault, 2005). Furthermore, for an author not fully confident in subjectivity such as Bourdieu, it has been necessary to adjust the hypothesis of interiorized dispositions by adding that of the *habitus* hysteresis – the unfit between *habitus* and field – that can leave some opportunity for independent reaction (Bourdieu, 1990).

On the side of those authors who have attempted to redefine the concept of subjectivity without destroying it, the Cartesian ontology of mind has turned towards normative references – such as in the Habermasian case – or moral *jusnaturalism* – such as in Touraine – retaining a strong reference to Kantian ideas of an enlightened, reasonable subject. In other cases this has turned towards new Hegelian considerations about reciprocal recognition of subjectivity (Honneth, 1995), or – conversely – towards the Spinozist elaboration of a vital, immanent and embodied subject. From all these legacies we understand that it is necessary to investigate the current social and political implications of the concepts of subject, subjectivity and subjectivation, which also means investigating where we ourselves are located when we use these concepts.

The research seems to be going in the direction of some sort of 'light ontology' of the idea of the subject; free from a substantialist and essentialist reference to the rational or emotional subject as the foundation, but also free from a melancholic and negativist mourning of the autonomous subject lost

in language, the unconscious and power relations. The research is moving towards a conceptualization of the subject able to take into account cultural and gender differences, historical and situated processes of subjectivation, complex relationships with techno-scientific tools, contextual capacities of resistance and creativity. Today there is no room in theoretical debate for a monolithic, essentialist, self-referential and Eurocentric vision of the subject; nevertheless, at the same time this criticism no longer needs a total and nihilistic refusal of the reference to subjectivity (Descombes, 2004). A new and broad field of theoretical and empirical investigation is now open for social sciences looking beyond old dichotomies such as body/consciousness, metaphysics/nihilism, determinism/voluntarism, imagination/reason.

Annotated further reading

- Habermas J (1987) *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Touraine A (1992) *Critique de la modernité*. Paris: Fayard (English edition 1993).
From a classical sociological standpoint, Touraine and Habermas have dedicated in these books in depth consideration to the theme of subject and subjectivity, and its connection with modern sociological thought. Although their analysis is different, they both share a strong reference to Enlightenment and its idea of reasonable subject. Among the theoretical reassessments of this theme, a more recent investigation is that offered by Pippin RB (2005) *The Persistence of Subjectivity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Braidotti R (2011) *Nomadic Subjects*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Braidotti R (2013) *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
From the relational side of the investigation on subject and subjectivity a way to look beyond poststructuralist deconstruction of the subject is that offered by the post-human reflection. The work of Rosi Braidotti is a valid example of the attempt to maintain a theoretical reference to the subject without being entrapped in an ontological self-referential approach. Gender studies and sociology of techno-science are the main empirical fields of this research.
- Nandy A (1983) *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. New Delhi and London: Oxford University Press.
- Mbembe A (2013) *Critique de la raison nègre*. Paris: La Découverte.
From postcolonial sensibility, Ashis Nandy's book has opened a reflection on the subjectivity of the non-European or non-white subject, on his/her degree of freedom and creativity, on his/her possibility of finding an authentic Self. We find a similar investigation in the book by Achille Mbembe: the reasonable subject of Enlightenment is not neutral or universal and it can be translated into the pluralism of different possible subjectivities.
- Subjectivity Review*, at: <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/sub/index.html>.
This transdisciplinary journal provides an interesting framework of discussion, from diverse theoretical standpoints, for the areas of contemporary social sciences that are carrying out research on the topic of subjectivity.

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résumé Dans cet article nous allons analyser le concept de sujet et les notions proches de subjectivité et subjectivation. Dans les sciences sociales les références au sujet, à l'individu, à l'agent, à la personne, à l'acteur social sont souvent utilisées d'une façon interchangeable. Cependant, ces concepts ont des significations analytiques différentes et chacun est lié à des différentes approches sociologiques. Aujourd'hui la recherche est orientée vers une idée de sujet et de subjectivité capable de prendre en compte les différences culturelles et de genre, les processus de subjectivation situés, les relations complexes avec la techno-science, les capacités contextuelles de résistance et créativité.

mots-clés différence ♦ domination ♦ subjectivité ♦ sujet ♦ théorie sociale

resumen El artículo analiza el concepto de sujeto y las nociones cercanas de subjetividad y subjectivación. En las ciencias sociales, muy a menudo, las referencias al sujeto, individuo, agente, persona o actor social se emplean indistintamente. Sin embargo, cada uno de estos conceptos tienen significados diferentes y están ligados a enfoques sociológicos distintos. Hoy en día, se afirma la idea de un sujeto y de una subjetividad capaz de tomar en cuenta las diferencias culturales y de género, los procesos de subjectivación situados, las relaciones complejas con la tecnociencia, así como la capacidad contextual de resistencia y de creatividad.

palabras clave diferencia ♦ dominación ♦ subjectividad ♦ sujeto ♦ teoría social